Save the Children

GLOBAL GIRLHOOD REPORT 2021
GIRLS' RIGHTS IN CRISIS

Contents

1. Executive Summary

Predicting a crisis for girls' rights

From its outset, the COVID-19 pandemic was more than a devastating global health emergency. Crises—including climate change-driven disasters, past epidemics such as Ebola and Zika virus, and violent conflict—have long been understood to have disproportionate consequences for women and girls.[1] The COVID-19 crisis is no exception, with early evidence revealing that containment measures and the resulting economic instability have increased girls' exposure to violence, reduced access to essential services and information, and directly impacted girls' ability to realise their rights.[2]

Since the pandemic was declared, more than half the world's population has experienced periods under complete or partial containment measures introduced to mitigate the spread of the virus.[3] Along with infections, these lockdowns and school closures have disrupted the protection programmes and services meant to prevent some of the worst outcomes of COVID-19 for girls.

Within weeks of national lockdowns, reports of increasing calls to domestic abuse hotlines were recorded across the world and early predications painted a bleak picture.[4]

Predications were especially troubling for forms of gender-based violence and discrimination that only occur in childhood. In April 2020, UNFPA estimated that disruptions to prevention programming could lead to 2 million cases of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) over the next decade that would not have occurred otherwise.[5] Save the Children estimated that the economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis alone could lead to an additional 1 million adolescent pregnancies in 2020, and UNFPA research now shows that pandemic-related interruptions to contraceptive use led to 1.4 million unintended pregnancies that year.[6] The most recent estimates from UNICEF suggest that an additional 10 million girls may be married by 2030 as a result of the pandemic—most during the next few years.[7]

Over a year and a half since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, data collection remains significantly disrupted, limiting access to real-time evidence of girls' experiences and rendering updates to global datasets nearly impossible. Quantitative evidence on whether early projections have been realised is scarce, and girls' experiences have, in some instances, become even less visible than before the pandemic. These data gaps have direct implications for whether response plans and recovery policies and budgets can effectively meet girls' needs. The Global Girlhood Report 2021 attempts to enhance our collective understanding of how the predicted impacts of the pandemic have been realised for girls while also recognising how much is still unknown.

Lei Tapang / Save the Children

Five-year-old Feliza* from the Philippines wears a mask to protect herself from the coronavirus.

METHODOLOGY

The Global Girlhood Report 2021 seeks to narrow ongoing evidence gaps, bringing together limited available evidence to better understand the impacts of COVID-19 on girls, more than a year and a half into the pandemic. It draws on publicly available data and findings from key informant interviews with Save the Children technical experts in six countries. These insights are complemented by policy "snapshots" looking at vulnerability to increases in child marriage due to COVID-19 in twelve countries and how governments are responding to-date.

Countries included in new analysis	Policy analysis	Key informant interviews
1. Bolivia	Y	-
2. Burkina Faso	Y	Y
3. Dominican Republic	Y	Y
4. Egypt	Y	Y
5. Ethiopia	Y	Y
6. Indonesia	Y	-
7. Lebanon	Y	Y
8. Mali	Y	-
9. Niger	Y	-
10. Nigeria	Y	-
11. Sierra Leone	Y	-
12. Somalia	Y	Y

Emerging evidence

Though the experiences of girls vary widely across countries and communities, available and emerging evidence supports widely held fears that the pandemic is exacerbating existing gender and other inequalities with girls' futures in the balance.

Girls and adult champions for their rights delivering programmes in low-income countries provide the most consistent reports that adolescent pregnancy, child marriage, and other forms of gender-based violence are increasing in their communities. Nationally representative data on increases in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy is not yet available. A 27% increase in the rate of child marriage was reported in one state in India and notably high numbers of interventions to prevent child marriages have been reported by civil society organisations in Ethiopia and Mozambique.[8] Most changes reported to Save the Children through girls in our programmes and our staff relate to school closures increasing pressure on girls to marry as getting a good education seems increasingly less likely, and due to growing risk of pregnancy through consensual relationships as well as increased exposure to violence due to less time spent supervised in school.[9] Worsening financial insecurity and related decreases in the cost of weddings have also been identified as incentives for child marriage during the pandemic.[10] Research in East and Southern Africa has identified sexual exploitation in exchange for essential resources as the primary cause of unintended pregnancies in their communities since the pandemic.[11]

Girls face significant challenges getting back to school and catching up on lost learning. Over 1.6 billion children had their educations interrupted by COVID-related school closures in 2020 and millions of girls remain out of school.[12] On average, girls in poorer countries have missed out on 22% more days in school than boys.[13] In sub-Saharan Africa, girls lost an average 69 days of education in 2020.[14] While data on whether girls have proven less likely to return to school remains limited and mixed,[15] multiple studies suggest that girls have had less access to remote education through lockdowns than boys.[16] Research to-date indicates that it is among adolescent girls and those most impacted by inequality and discrimination that we have seen the worst impacts as compared to boys.[17] Save the Children's global survey found that in 2020, girls in our programmes were twice as likely to have increased their domestic work during school closures to the extent that it interfered with their studies.[18] Staff in Burkina Faso now fear that economic hardship caused by the ongoing pandemic means that families cannot sustain themselves without girls' assistance in the home, and staff in Somalia report that parents' concerns about girls contracting COVID-19 in school have created an additional barrier.

COVID-19 has further restricted girls' already limited access to decision-making spaces, and the shift to virtual spaces has not increased their access to the leaders making the decisions. Global events have not become more accessible to girls through online platforms. The digital divide, lack of effort to make these spaces more accessible (particularly to non-English speaking girls), and a growing tendency for leaders to pre-record messages have excluded girls from effective participation in critical decision-making moments, including the Generation Equality Forums. No girls have been included in national COVID-19 taskforces and Save the Children staff in Somalia and the Dominican Republic report that COVID-related closures of schools and girl-friendly spaces have denied girls access to community-level decision-making.

Responses to the pandemic have struggled to address the needs of girls impacted by multiple forms of inequality and discrimination. Governments and civil society have adapted services in an effort to deliver them safely throughout the pandemic.[19] However, Save the Children staff in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Somalia report that reaching girls with disabilities and those living in rural areas—already too often excluded from essential services—was made more difficult during the pandemic and at times ceased altogether. Girls on the move have experienced a combination of forced migration and lost freedom of movement due to border closures and lockdowns. Those living in humanitarian contexts have faced intersecting COVID-, climate-, and conflict-related crises, and reports describe increasing exposure to gender-based violence, including child marriage.[20] By November 2020, 27 of 32 operations in humanitarian settings reported an increase in

gender-based violence and 89% of responses described the risk of gender-based violence as severe or extreme.[21]

Responses to COVID-19 have recognised the increased risk of gender-based violence, but evidence of specific attention to girls and funding to support implementation is limited. More than 70% of COVID-19 responses include measures to address gender-based violence, but with limited age-disaggregated data it is difficult to tell whether girls' specific needs are addressed.[22] Consistent civil society pressure over the course of 2020 eventually led to 97% of requested funding to address gender-based violence under the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan being met. Yet despite far greater recognition of the need to address violence in planning for 2021, a mere 11% of necessary funds for protection programmes for gender-based violence have been received.[23]

Postponement and new COVID-19 driven priorities have impacted the pivotal Generation Equality process, but important targets and new architecture for further commitments and multisectoral collaboration have been established. The Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality set a target to prevent nine million child marriages in five years and has attracted important commitments to support delivery,[24] including from high-prevalence low- and middle-income countries like Burkina Faso and Nigeria.[25] However, further commitments (particularly funding), a strong accountability framework, and improved, meaningful engagement with girls will determine whether the worst impacts of the pandemic can be averted to put the world on track to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

In Egypt, girls are often forced to leave school for economic or safety reasons. Skill building programs that support out-of-school youth such as Yasmeen will be an essential part of pandemic recovery.

Joseph Raouf / Save the Children

Baby Ismil* is comforted by his mother Azida* and grandmother Fatima*. 19-year-old Azida* (pictured right) was eight months pregnant when she fled Myanmar. The stressors of migration and displacement can increase the health complications young mothers face while impacting their ability to access care.

Hanna Adcock / Save the Children

Summary of recommendations

As the world continues to strive toward gender equality and to prevent the worst impacts of COVID-19 on girls' rights, Save the Children recommends that governments:

1. **Raise girls' voices** by supporting their right to safe and meaningful participation in all public decision-making throughout the COVID-19 response and through delivery of the Generation Equality Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality. Girls have a critical role to play in the design and implementation of policy and accountability processes essential to preventing and building resilience against ongoing and future crises.

2. **Address immediate and ongoing risks of gender-based violence, including child marriage,** by putting girls' rights and gender equality at the centre of COVID-19 and humanitarian responses, development policy, and wider efforts to build forward better.

3. **Fulfil their duty to guarantee the rights of girls in all their diversity** by conducting and applying intersectional gender and power analyses to inform evidence-based and inclusive policy and programme responses. Safe and ethical data collection must be improved to better understand and respond in real-time to the impacts of COVID-19 and compounding economic, climate, and conflict-related crises.

4. **Ensure the continued commitment and implementation of a principled humanitarian response in all humanitarian settings**, including the safe and unrestricted participation of female humanitarian staff in needs assessments, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all humanitarian services at every level. Without the full participation of female staff, humanitarian assistance will not be delivered in a manner that upholds core humanitarian principles and standards and will be ineffective in addressing girls' needs.

5. **Join the Generation Equality movement** by making fully-resourced commitments to support delivery of the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality and ensure accountability for delivery to girls through age-disaggregated targets.

Detailed recommendations to governments, United Nations (UN) and humanitarian actors, donors, and civil society are set out in the full report.

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2. The COVID-19 crisis for girls' rights

With some countries' vaccination programmes now well-progressed, while others confront the beginnings of their first outbreaks or new variants, the experiences of girls in different countries and communities vary widely.[26] Global and nationally representative data remains scarce, with existing information largely limited to smaller studies and qualitative reports. Evidence of the threat that COVID-19 poses to hard-won and fragile progress for girls' rights is, however, already emerging.

> **"Cultural norms that value boys more than girls exacerbate their vulnerabilities to violence in Burkina Faso. COVID-19 has been a further setback for girls and gender equality."**

Save the Children staff from offices in Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Lebanon, and Somalia interviewed for this report have described how the pandemic is undermining progress to eliminate child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence, reduce adolescent pregnancy, and increase girls' access to education and decision-making spaces.[27] Where possible this information has been supplemented by findings from other studies.

Child Marriage

Rates of child marriage are expected to rise as a result of the COVID-19 crisis due to increasing risk factors like being out of school, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services and information, disruptions to gender-based violence and child protection services, increasing food and economic insecurity, and exposure to other forms of gender-based violence.[28]

UNFPA, UNICEF, Save the Children, and others have predicted the first global increase in child marriage rates in more than 20 years. The latest estimates, informed by demographic data and historical insights on the effects of crisis on rates of child marriage, suggest that over 10 million more girls could be married as children in the next ten years, resulting in 110 million child marriages by 2030.[29]

Uwase* (17) was married in exchange for the promise of a dowry.

Hugh Kinsella Cunningham / Save the Children

Projections continue to be heavily relied on as global and nationally-representative figures on the *realised* impact of the crisis on child marriage are not yet available. Data collection has been limited by containment measures and safety and ethical concerns due to disruptions in response services, or deprioritised due to competing pressures to respond to the pandemic.[30] Even before the pandemic, many of the surveys used to collect data on child marriage were only collected every few years.[31] The rate of child marriage is typically calculated based on the number of women aged 20-24 years who were married before the age of 18.[32] This retrospective approach means that even with no interruption to data collection, surveys would not show any increase in rates of child marriage until girls married before 18 reached the age of 20, two or more years after the pandemic began.

More informal methods to track child marriage rates have also been disrupted. A Save the Children staff member in Egypt observed that lockdowns made it difficult to track child marriage rates.

> "Because of COVID, there were no celebrations and any signs that would tell that, for example, there is child marriage. Before COVID, it would have been very obvious there is a marriage... a wedding celebration here. But during COVID it was different."

Some of the greatest insights into the pandemic's impact on child marriage rates come from localised and anecdotal reports. For example, the Bureau of Women and Children's Affairs in Ethiopia's Amhara District reported preventing the marriage of 500 girls in June 2020.[33] In the Indian state of Telengana, authorities reported intervening to stop 1,355 child marriages between April 2020 and March 2021. This 27% increase on the previous year suggests that feared reversals in progress to end the practice are being realised.[34] In October 2020, Save the Children projected that despite India's leading contribution to global reductions in child marriage, the economic impacts of COVID-19 could lead to almost one million additional child marriages across South Asia by 2025, predictions made before the worst outbreaks in India.[35] In February 2021, a child support phoneline supported by Save the Children to address violence against children during COVID-19 reported rescuing 26 girls from child marriage in Mozambique.[36]

Staff also report that in the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Niger, and Somalia, school closures appear to have had a direct impact on the increasing rates and risks of child marriage. With no fixed return dates, child marriages were observed to increase particularly in rural areas where "return to school" programmes are limited. Girls have increasingly dropped out of school in Ethiopia and Somalia.

Staff also report that parents purportedly used school closures to convince their daughters to marry. Interviews with refugee girls in Jordan found that some felt that school closures and limited job prospects meant there was no use studying and that marriage was now a better alternative.[37] This sentiment was reflected by some families in Somalia, according to an interview with Save the Children staff. There, families were believed to justify child marriage using the fact that girls were now "idle" at home, rather than engaged in educational activities.

Extreme hardship can create financial incentives for families to marry their daughters early.[38] The pandemic has impacted livelihoods, including through business closures and the wider economic impacts of the crisis.[39] In October 2020, the World Bank reported that global extreme poverty rose for the first time in 20 years as a combined result of COVID-19, the growing climate crisis, and conflict.[40] These economic impacts were also observed by Save the Children staff. In Somalia, marriage in exchange for a dowry was seen as an option to relieve economic hardship driven by the pandemic. Financial hardships were viewed as motivating many families in Lebanon towards child marriage as a "coping mechanism" with more immediate, perceived stability over the uncertainty of continued education or future job prospects, even where families were not culturally inclined towards the practice.

In some cases, COVID-19 has informed girls' own marriage decisions. In Southern and Central Somalia, staff described accounts of girls choosing to marry due to interaction with boys and a lack of activities like school during the pandemic, even without family support or encouragement.

> "In some areas there was an issue around elopement – young girls and boys eloped together because families were not necessarily in favour of the marriage because they are young [and] not financially stable. Because of the relationship, children are eloping to force their families into accepting their marriage. Cases have been reported."

Girls in forced displacement, and refugee contexts in particular, face increased risk of child marriage due to gender inequality combining with increased drivers like disruptions to education and increased physical and economic insecurity. Even before COVID-19, higher and rising rates of child marriage were recorded in refugee communities in contexts such as Lebanon, where parents viewed marriage as a route for physical protection for their daughters in conflict-affected areas and refugee camps.[41] Girls married in forced displacement or insecure settings may actually face greater risks of intimate partner and other forms of domestic violence than girls married in more stable

settings, however, as these forms of violence are more likely to be condoned.[42] Insecurity and forced displacement of large populations in Burkina Faso has fuelled a rise in child marriage amongst migrant girls, according to Save the Children staff.

Recent research from Save the Children notes that intersecting drivers, such as poverty and protection risks, likely contribute to the fact that refugee girls in the Middle East and North African region experience higher and increasing child marriage rates than girls from host communities. In places where laws against child marriage do exist, refugee families may also be unaware of the laws or prefer to follow their own marriage customs.[43] In Egypt, Save the Children's awareness-raising efforts at the Ministerial level have focussed on reporting and stopping rising rates of child marriage during the pandemic and addressing the subsequent impacts on girls.[44]

GIRLS IN THE SAHEL – GROWING UP THROUGH CONFLICT, COVID-19, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Around five million children across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in the central Sahel Region of West Africa now face a growing humanitarian crisis driven by protracted conflict, climate-related drought, famine, and now, the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.

More than 3,600 schools have closed as a result of escalating violence between non-state armed groups, denying more than 750,000 children an education. Being out of the classroom exposes children to risks like domestic violence or being forced into child marriage or child labour. Countries in the Sahel region have the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Current figures, however, pre-date the worsening crises and risk factors for child marriage like time out-of-school, economic and food insecurity, and exposure to other forms of gender-based violence have all now likely increased.

Girls across the region have stories to tell of how violence, climate change, and the pandemic have impacted their lives.

Balkissa*, 13, and her family were forced to flee their village in Niger by insurgents.

Before the insecurity, my mother sold chickens and my father had small shop. But since we left both are just at home. Any revenue, even food, is difficult to get.

We did not witness scenes, but after our departure, we heard that they burnt granaries. We used to have our granaries full of millet, which we ate. We were at peace before the arrival of the insurgents, who troubled our peace and killed people in and outside the village. We were shocked.

Aissata*, 11, was also forced from her home in Mali by insurgent violence. Now she is working to rebuild her life in a safer area and has registered to attend a new school.

I found that the others had already started classes. I worked hard, I persevered and overtook them. And I became top of the class.

Ongoing economic insecurity means that Aissata works at a market to support her family. Since the pandemic, school has provided her with important information about staying safe.

The teacher told us during the coronavirus lesson to wash our hands all the time and wear masks. This can protect us from many serious diseases.

Balkissa, 13, outside her home in Tillaberi region, Niger.*

Apsatou Bagaya / Save the Children

Aissata, 11, in her classroom.

Seyba Keita / Save the Children

When I grow up, I would like to be a doctor to care for people in my community.

In response to the Sahel crises, Save the Children and the EU have launched a landmark programme that trains teachers in child rights, child safeguarding, and how to deliver psychosocial first aid and mental health support. It has set up community child protection committees, which link up to the schools so children in need of case management can be referred. It also provides school supplies and runs catch-up lessons.

Amina*, in her home in India.

Save the Children

RAISING GOVERNMENT AWARENESS TO PREVENT INCREASES IN CHILD MARRIAGE

Amina* lives in West Bengal, India. She was 15 when her father lost his income during COVID-19 lockdown, and her family found themselves struggling to survive. Amina's father received a marriage proposal for her and he agreed as the money the family would receive would help solve their financial problems. However, Amina's mother was furious and went to Save the Children for help. Together they persuaded Amina's father to reject the marriage offer and to continue her education.

Gender-based violence

Child marriage is not the only form of gender-based violence reported to be increasing due to COVID-19. A rapid needs assessment conducted by UN Women in April 2020 across 49 countries in five regions found that 80% of countries that provided data registered an increase in reports of violence to helplines (including increases of up to 400%). Seventy percent registered an increase in reports of violence to health centres.[45] Contemporary reports and past epidemics suggest that COVID-19 lockdowns have increased the risk of violence to girls by confining them to often cramped conditions at home with abusers and restricting access to support services.[46] Increased levels of violence, like the pandemic has lasted longer than expected. In Bolivia an average of around 50 cases of violence against children, including sexual assault and rape of girls were reported each day during early

containment measures, since then a further 282 cases of rape against children were reported between January and March 2021, according to the State Attorney-General.[47]

Where children have access to online technology, increases in use during lockdown (including for distance education) have been associated with increased reports of online sexual exploitation and abuse. In March 2020, the USA's National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children reported a 106% increase in global reports of suspected child sexual exploitation compared with March 2019, and during its first COVID-19 lockdown, the India Child Protection Fund reported a 95% increase in online searches for child sexual abuse content.[48]

Save the Children staff interviewed in the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Lebanon, and Somalia report increases in intimate partner violence, other forms of domestic abuse, and sexual exploitation. They report rising incidence of sexual harassment and rape, with limited legislative protections and response programmes in some countries. In Somalia, Save the Children staff report multiple incidents of violence against girls, including rape and murder, but were not sure that a clear connection could be made between perceptions that violence was increasing and the impacts of the pandemic and other changing circumstances like forced displacement and shifting practices around formal and informal systems of punishment.

"This risk has increased with this group, basically because the perpetrator, the criminals, know there is no system to protect these girls and the penalties are minimal."

"Everyone was just speaking about Covid, speaking about awareness, hygiene campaigns…but the priority was not there for stuff related to clinical management of rape or gender-based violence survivors' care."

Pandemic conditions also appear to be enabling an increase in female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in some places. In Somalia, Save the Children and other local organisations have reported that families are taking advantage of school closures to carry out FGM/C so that girls have time to recover, without missing school or their absence being noticed.[49] In Egypt, Save the Children staff also report that the threat of FGM/C was increasing because families felt that they were no longer being monitored due to COVID-related containment measures. However, the team noted that these insights are anecdotal, due to difficulty tracking rates of FGM/C.

While adaptations and innovations have been made to ensure Save the Children and other organisations are able to deliver

support and services for children's protection, it has been challenging to connect with communities about these issues due to lockdown measures. For instance, schools in Ethiopia typically served as a hub for outreach activities. With schools closed and gender-based violence prevention programmes switched to remote delivery and mass media campaigns, staff reported difficulty knowing the extent of their reach. In Lebanon, delivering psychosocial support programmes and case management required consistent reassessment of what elements could be delivered remotely and how to best support girls based both on public health and protection risks. Save the Children Ethiopia now provides training to frontline workers at one stop centres to provide case management for gender-based violence to link girls with the support services they need.

Projections suggest that without urgent action, a further 8.9 million children could be in child labour by the end of 2022 due to the economic impacts of COVID-19.[50] In the Dominican Republic, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, and staff at the Save the Children country office have identified that girls in some communities are working on the street instead of taking classes. Trafficking of girls for labour and sexual exploitation through social media channels has also risen, leading authorities to take further preventative measures and increase awareness of the ways in which girls can be trafficked, according to country office staff in the Dominican Republic.

Children in Lebanon currently face the dual impacts of COVID-19 and an ongoing economic crisis. Save the Children staff in Lebanon reported 306 cases of children working on the streets in the first half of 2021, compared to 346 over the whole of 2022.[51] This includes children as young as five searching

the streets for food and scraps to sell. Save the Children staff in Lebanon fear that these activities, as well as increased time spent online in part due to distance education, are increasing risk of sexual exploitation for girls.

Adolescent pregnancy and access to sexual and reproductive health services and information

Adolescent pregnancy has increased during past health crises. During the 2014-15 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, some of the worst-affected areas saw a 65% increase in unintended pregnancies.[52] The socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 share key similarities with that of Ebola, including time out of school and subsequent increased exposure to gender-based violence, as well as unsupervised time for consensual sex between adolescents.[53] Evidence from some countries is now linking adolescent pregnancies to the COVID-19 crisis.[54]

Childbirth and pregnancy-related complications were the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 globally before the pandemic. The loss of access to modern contraceptives, comprehensive sexuality education, and other adolescent-responsive reproductive health services and information due to COVID-19 are expected to lead to an increase in pregnancies and subsequent death and disability.[55] In April 2020, International Planned Parenthood Foundation members reported that they had closed 5,633 clinics and community-based outlets across 64 countries.[56] By March 2021, UNFPA estimated that the pandemic had disrupted contraceptive use for around 12 million women, resulting in 1.4 million unintended pregnancies during 2020,

based on analysis in 115 low- and middle-income countries.[57] The specific impacts on adolescent girls, already likely to face greater age-related barriers to accessing services, have not been counted.

As with child marriage, the drivers of adolescent pregnancy are varied and interconnected. A recent study conducted in four East African countries (Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda) found that pregnancy was reportedly the primary driver of girls dropping out of school throughout the pandemic. An overwhelming number of the study's focus group participants identified "transactional sex for basic goods" as driving these pregnancies, suggesting an interaction with economic hardship and sexual violence and exploitation.[58] The report adds that girls who find themselves pregnant are more likely to face social stigma and further economic hardship, preventing their return to school and increasing their experiences with neglect or abuse within the household.

This sentiment was shared by a staff member of Save the Children Somalia, who noted that stigma has driven pregnant girls away from their families. Staff have observed that, when girls find themselves unable to access shelter or support services at home, they may relocate to stay with friends or strangers, or migrate and assume a new identity—exposing them to other risks.

Lack of support for adolescent mothers to return to school, bans on pregnant girls attending school in some countries, and less formal school expulsion practices mean that any increase in adolescent pregnancies due to COVID-19 is likely to have ongoing effects for education outcomes. In Somalia, an advocacy adviser explained that already married or pregnant adolescent girls are viewed to be women by their communities, meaning age-appropriate resources and services may be deemed as less relevant by those around her.

Accounts of struggles accessing the resources needed to prevent pregnancy during the pandemic have been shared by Save the Children staff in Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic, and Somalia, bolstering the concerns emphasised by providers like the International Planned Parenthood Federation about their own service closures. During the 2014-2015 Ebola crisis, diversion of resources from sexual and reproductive health services to address the epidemic was linked to increased maternal mortality.[59] Save the Children staff in the Dominican Republic report that similar diversions by health authorities have led to a rise in adolescent pregnancies and preventable maternal mortality among girls. Staff in Burkina Faso, report seeing changes in girls' ability to access contraception and reproductive services over a two-month period of school and service closures. In Somalia even routine menstrual hygiene management has become more difficult due to inflation in the price of sanitary pads.

Maintaining access to essential, routine sexual and reproductive health services throughout the pandemic is critical for adolescent mothers who face high-risk pregnancies and births. In Ethiopia, Save the Children has worked with the Ministry of Health and influential community groups to raise awareness of access to health services and antenatal care for adolescent mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Somalia, Save the Children has worked with local NGOs and the Ministry of Social Affairs to provide referral mechanisms and support for pregnant girls through shelters, particularly for girls who are refugees or have been forcibly displaced. Girls who fall pregnant in Somalia after marrying are treated as adults so may not receive the support they need through adolescent pregnancy, childbirth, and as child mothers.

SUNDAY*, ROSE*, AND ALICE* - CHILD MOTHERS CAMPAIGNING FOR EDUCATION IN UGANDA

Sixteen-year-old Sunday*, 17-year-old Rose*, and Alice*, also 16, live in a refugee settlement in Uganda. They are among 11 child mothers who became pregnant during the COVID-19 lockdown when schools were closed who have since fought for their right to return to school.

"*I came back to school after having my baby because I want to be able to support myself and my child in the future,*" says Rose, who wants to graduate to become a teacher.

Attending school whilst pregnant or caring for a baby is not easy. Sunday* is five months pregnant. "*Some mornings I wake up and feel sick, and this makes me to be late to school. I also feel tired and want to sleep when I am at school so it is hard to pay attention to the teacher,*" she says. After becoming mothers, girls in the settlement asked for more support for themselves and other mothers to get back to school after lockdown.

Alice* is one of six daughters in her family. She has a six-month-old daughter. Like most girls in the settlement, when her mother is busy, she has to go to school with her baby. Her mother has been very supportive since she was pregnant. Her mother took care of her and made sure she went back to school when the schools opened. "*My daughter was very young, too young to stop going to school. I want her to continue with her studies and have a brighter future.*"

Since the pandemic and school re-openings, Save The Children has encouraged pregnant girls and girls who are mothers to come back to school, providing safe spaces, school meals, and caregiving support to ensure the girls can continue learning with their babies. They have also given the girls learning materials like books, pens, and mathematical sets.

"*My advice to girls in school is to continue their education to get a better future,*" says Alice. You can see a short film featuring Alice, Sunday, and Rose here.

Sacha Myers / Save the Children

Education

In 2020, over 1.6 billion children had their educations interrupted by COVID-19-related school closures.[60] UNESCO now estimates that of the nearly 743 million girls who have been out of school globally since the pandemic began, 111 million girls are living in the least developed countries – places where girls' education was already compromised.[61] On average, girls in poorer countries missed 22% more days in school than boys. In Afghanistan, children have lost over 13% of their total lifetime school days, with boys missing 9% of their school days, and girls missing 21%.[62] In sub-Saharan Africa, girls lost an average 69 days of education in 2020. In a region where girls typically spend less years in school than children in richer countries, this represents a critical loss, particularly for adolescent girls at an age when pressure to marry is increasing.[63]

Almost two years since COVID-19 first disrupted schooling in parts of Southeast Asia, no national education system worldwide has returned to "normal."[64] In June 2021, nationwide school closures due to the pandemic were in place in 19 countries and hundreds of millions of children were still out of school.[65]

Some schools in parts of West Africa that shut down because of the pandemic have remained closed due to the additional threat of insecurity, and others closed before the pandemic remain closed. Attacks on schools, COVID-related school closures, and other impacts on parents' support for girls attending

Muna's school closed in August 2020 when the majority of people in her community were forced to move due to severe water shortages. She hasn't been to classes since but studies at home each day because she doesn't want to forget what she's learnt.

school present continuing and compounding challenges to girls' education in conflict-affected areas. In Nigeria, 300 girls were kidnapped from secondary school in Zamfara State in early 2021.[66] Across the country, high-frequency phone surveys show that the percentage of respondents who were uncertain as to whether their children will ever return to school rose from 4.8% in August 2020 to 15.5% in March 2021. Loss of certainty was even starker for the poorest respondents, rising from 1.5% to 18.9% in the same period.[67]

Past experience and gender inequalities in access to education suggest that girls are more likely than boys to never return to school when COVID-19 closures end—in one heavily Ebola-impacted village in Sierra Leone, girls' school enrolment dropped by one-third following the 2014-15 outbreak.[68] Data on gender differences in the number of children returning to school following COVID-19 school closures to-date is mixed. A rapid assessment in four countries found that more girls surveyed self-reported they were unlikely to return to school than boys in Ethiopia and India, while in Pakistan and Nigeria, significantly more boys than girls surveyed reported that they were unlikely to return. Boys were however more likely to have access to out-of-school learning alternatives across the four countries.[69]

A rapid assessment by the Malala Fund in Amhara, Gambela, and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia found that while 95% of respondents expected to return to school, girls in households facing economic insecurity were less likely than boys to expect to return and even more unlikely to return where food insecurity was also reported. Girls' reasons for fearing they would be unable to return to school differed across regions but included the need to work, risk of catching COVID-19, and in Amhara, parents not allowing them to return.[70]

Research to-date indicates that it is among adolescent girls and those most impacted by inequality and discrimination that we have seen the worst impacts as compared to boys.[71] When schools reopened in Uganda, ten percent of grade ten girls did not return, compared to eight percent of boys, that gap rose among older girls to 18% of girls compared to 2% of boys in grade twelve.[72] A survey of 4,000 adolescents living in urban settlements in Kenya found that 16% of girls did not return when schools reopened in January 2021 compared to 8% of boys.[73] These findings underscore the importance of data disaggregation. Older adolescent girls and girls impacted by intersecting inequalities are at greater risk of child marriage, other forms of gender-based violence and adolescent pregnancy, and more likely to be expected to take on home-based or income-generating work – all factors that increase barriers to returning to school.[74]

Save the Children staff, particularly in Somalia and Burkina Faso, describe clearer gender differences in return to school with significant declines in girls' school attendance and enrolment compared to boys, and anecdotal data suggesting fewer girls are returning to school following lockdowns. Staff from Save the Children Somalia report seeing parents sending their sons rather than their daughters to school, or prioritising other issues, creating an uncertain future for girls. Even in places and during periods when schools were open, staff report that parents expressed concerns about their daughters catching COVID-19, leading them to discourage girls from attending school; this perhaps reflects gender norms that assume girls are more physically vulnerable than boys.

> **"The pandemic has created 'protectionism' by parents to say 'don't go to school because you will get infected.' [This] limits girls' ability to access information from their peers."**

Domestic labour and care work demands on girls have also increased. A 2020 study of more than 8,000 children participating in Save the Children programmes across 37 countries found that 63% of girls reported an increase in chores since COVID-19, and more than half (52%) reported an increase in time spent caring for siblings and others. Significantly, girls reported this work had stopped them from studying at twice the rate that boys did.[75] Staff in Burkina Faso explained that uptake of domestic labour and care work for girls was seen as providing

increasingly important benefits to families during periods of financial insecurity by allowing mothers to take on paid work while daughters stayed home, decreasing the likelihood of girls' return to school once lockdowns ended. According to Save the Children staff in Lebanon, a lack of access to technology such as tablets, computers, and the internet, and parents' doubts over the delivery and quality of education, limited girls' access to remote learning—with potential for long-term effects.

> **"[Many of the families] were not satisfied [by the remote modality], thus it affected their belief on the importance of having their children attending school and pursuing their education."**

When Samira,* 15, was forcibly displaced from her village in Burkina Faso, she was out of school for the next two years. Girls in her region are facing increased risk of early marriage due to COVID-19 and related school closures.

Adrien Bitibaly / Save the Children

Access to decision-making spaces

Adolescent girls have the right to participate in decision-making for matters that affect their lives and their communities.[76] Nearly every country in the world has committed to delivering on this right.[77] Girls are the experts in their own lives, yet there are very few governance institutions or other decision-making spaces with safe and meaningful participatory mechanisms for children to engage in policy-making.[78]

> **Children's participation** is the informed and willing involvement of children in any matter concerning them directly or indirectly. It means children having the opportunity to express views, having these views taken seriously, and having the opportunity to influence decision-making. This includes children of different ages, genders, and abilities, and those children most marginalised in a society.[79]

Even before the pandemic, adolescent girls faced significant age- and gender-related barriers to accessing decision-making spaces. Cultural practices that dictate what girls and women can do offer girls less freedom to participate in decision making activities than boys, and are more likely to reward boys for speaking up than girls.[80] Inequalities in education mean girls have less access to learning spaces, which not only provide knowledge and skills that enhance girls' capacity to engage in decision-making, but are key entry points for children's participation and collective agency.[81] Gender-based violence, online and in-person, also limits girls' ability to participate safely in decision-making spaces.[82] This includes child marriage and other circumstances like child-motherhood that increase the inequitable division of household labour and decrease the time girls have to participate in decision-making spaces.[83]

Anecdotal reports shared through interviews with Save the Children staff in Somalia and the Dominican Republic describe increasing restrictions on girls' access to decision-making spaces. During COVID-19, social distancing and other containment measures that have limited access to school and child-friendly spaces. This has prevented girls from accessing critical peer networks and safe spaces for shared discussions on priorities and solutions to the issues they face. For example, Save the Children's own interventions to provide decision-making spaces for girls in Somalia have either been delayed or put on hold until it is safer to conduct activities. Staff in Somalia also reflected on growing informal movements of girls and young people acting in the absence of programme support, using social media to publicise cases of rape and other sexual violence against women and girls, and to demand answers and voice their support for policy change.

While data is not readily available on the inclusion of children in COVID-19 task forces (see further discussion in chapter 4.1 COVID-19 Response Plans), the fact that few governance spaces offer meaningful participatory mechanisms for children's engagement makes it reasonable to believe that children of all genders have been left out. A failure to provide safe and meaningful access for children to participate in policy-making means that their experiences and needs often go unaccounted for and unaddressed. For girls, who already face multiple and intersecting barriers to inclusion, this results in ineffective response mechanisms and can open them up to greater risks and discrimination.[84] In Somaliland, Save the Children has continued to work with girls' sports clubs to provide a platform to raise awareness and discuss how to challenge harmful practices and norms that violate girls' rights.

Restrictions on travel due to COVID-19 and the requirement that global events be held online offered hope that these spaces would be more accessible to girls, particularly those who face cost and visa-related barriers to access global and regional policy-making forums. The reality, however, has been mixed. Technological challenges, including girls' own access to technology as well as unreliable connectivity and poorly coordinated virtual language interpretation (even at the highest levels) continue to pose challenges. The growing tendency for governments to send pre-recorded speeches to events rather than participating live has reduced accountability to girls once available to those who were able to attend events in person. These challenges have unfortunately been particularly apparent at high-level UN events including the 2021 Generation Equality Forums in Mexico and France, which represent critical decision-making spaces for girls and opportunities to engage with peer advocates.[85]

CASE STUDY

USING ART AS A TOOL TO SUPPORT GIRLS TO SPEAK UP TO DECISION-MAKERS AND THE PUBLIC

As part of a collaboration called #DreamsBetweenMyEyes, Save the Children International worked with a local partner, The Orenda Tribe, to support children to speak up on girls' rights in the Middle East and North Africa. Children participated in a series of artivism (art + activism) workshops where they were asked about the challenges for girls in their community, what they would like to change, who they would want to support them, what superpowers they would have to do that, and what future they would like to see. Using art has been a powerful tool to engage with the public and decision-makers in both Egypt and Lebanon, and the outcomes of the work have also been developed into a children's story-book, allowing messages to continue to be shared virtually. You can watch the campaign video and read the storybook online.

3. The intersecting impacts of COVID-19 on girls' rights

COVID-19 is now widely recognised as having deepened existing inequalities. For girls, this includes not just gender inequality but also inequalities driven by discrimination on the basis of intersecting characteristics and identities including age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, and migration and displacement status. In all instances, more data is needed to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on girls who experience intersecting inequalities, although the pandemic has increased critical ethical and safety concerns.

CHALLENGES COLLECTING DATA ON INTERSECTING EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19

Data is too rarely comprehensively disaggregated, and lockdowns and school closures may have made the girls most impacted by inequality and discrimination even less visible. Existing rapid data collection methods, like phone surveys, exclude those who cannot access the necessary technology. For cost and social reasons, girls are less likely to have access to phones, including in some instances due to fear of sexual harassment and social stigma based on the belief that girls will use phones to form sexual relationships.[86] Girls with disabilities will also be excluded if phone technology is inaccessible.[87] Household surveys completed by parents may also be ineffective in collecting data on issues children do not discuss with their parents, including subjects such as sexual activity, sexual orientation, and gender identity for which they might be stigmatised. Staff from Save the Children offices in the Dominican Republic and Somalia described sexuality as a taboo subject that cannot be discussed with ease, and reports from Somalia have indicated that girls in same-sex relationships among the diaspora have been deported.

COVID-19 containment measures and the possibility of infection have further increased the risk of harm to children participating in data collection on traumatic experiences or issues that may associate them with stigmatised behaviours, identities, and characteristics, or expose them to retribution for reporting experiences or actions by others.

While data is critical to improved policy-making and programme design, it must always conform to ethical and safeguarding standards to ensure that it does not increase risk of harm.[88]

Girls with disabilities

Children with disabilities are often hidden from society due to cultural stigma. Even before the pandemic, children with disabilities made up 15% of out-of-school children, and girls with disabilities were more likely to experience violence or miss out on health, nutrition, and assistive services than children without disabilities and boys with disabilities.[89] Children with disabilities may be more likely than children without disabilities to contract COVID-19 variants, increasing their need to self-isolate.[90] Increased violence in the home during lockdown periods, school closures, the shift to remote learning, and reductions in service provision due to the pandemic will all have disproportionately impacted girls with disabilities and their opportunity to shape COVID-19 responses.

Anecdotal data gathered by Save the Children country offices in Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Lebanon, and Somalia suggests that the pandemic has had specific impacts for girls with disabilities and their rights. In the Dominican Republic, Save the Children has responded to lack of access to services and resources with the provision of diapers and special nutrition kits. Staff from the Somalia office describe anecdotal reports that girls with disabilities have faced increased risk of sexual violence and other forms of abuse since the pandemic began.

Access to safe, quality education has also been compromised for girls with disabilities in Somalia. Schools are less willing to accommodate girls with disabilities, leaving them excluded from spaces where they could connect with other girls. Ensuring that girls with disabilities have accessible tools and technologies adapted to enable them to learn from home has not always been guaranteed, with measures at times temporary and unsustainable over a longer period.

Save the Children's Ethiopia office noted that a lack of knowledge about the needs of girls with disabilities and on effective techniques to engage with them at a ministry level, as well as in sectors such as education, has been a barrier to their inclusion in decision-making processes and now, critically, COVID-19 response design. Failing to include the perspectives of representative groups of girls with disabilities while preparing

crisis response and recovery plans means that their needs and preferences are not fully accounted for, and denies their right to have their views given due weight in decisions that affect them.[91] In Burkina Faso, Save the Children has prioritised the need to ensure that girls with disabilities are not discriminated against as part of their child protection programme.[92]

EARLY EFFORTS TO MAKE PROGRAMMING INCLUSIVE FOR GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES

Save the Children's Somalia Country Office has adapted their work to ensure girls can continue their education under a national "Back to School Safely" campaign. Mask-wearing, social distancing and handwashing, and building awareness of these best practices have been incorporated to create a safe learning environment in schools. The campaign has provided a platform for Save the Children to champion girls' rights to education and to grow up in a safe environment at school and at home. Save the Children has begun to develop parallel tracks under the "safe back to school" programme to cater to the additional needs of girls with disabilities who cannot easily access online learning through extra classes.

Girls in rural areas

Girls living in rural areas have been among the hardest to reach since the pandemic began. Even before the pandemic, girls growing up in rural areas typically experienced worse outcomes across key indicators for children, with lower educational attainment; less access to essential health services and information, gender-based violence and child protection services; and higher rates of stunting, adolescent pregnancy, and child marriage.[93]

Save the Children staff in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Somalia describe increased challenges reaching girls in rural areas since the pandemic began and reports of deepening inequalities, including declines in school attendance. In Burkina Faso however, the impact of COVID-19 is difficult to separate from the impacts of ongoing conflict. Staff in Somalia and Ethiopia describe increases in child marriage during school closures in rural areas, where the practice was already more common. For Ethiopia, this includes areas like Tigray, where conflict and associated gender-based violence has intensified through 2021. Staff interviewed in Ethiopia provided anecdotal reports of increases in child marriage in the rural Amhara, Tigray, and Somali regions, as well as other forms of sexual violence in towns and cities. They described a perception that sexual violence had increased in rural areas and that FGM/C in particular was increasing against girls from lower-income households where girls and parents have less access to information about the risks.

The methods that Save the Children staff use to remotely engage with children during lockdowns have not always been effective for

REACHING GIRLS IN REMOTE AREAS WITH THE RIGHT TO LEARN

In Ethiopia, the Save the Children Camel Library[94] has been able to take textbooks to girls from rural, and particularly migrant communities, by camel, to ensure that they can continue to learn at home through an initiative set up in partnership with the Ethiopian Ministry of Education. Save the Children have also used television channels to reach girls with educational sessions in rural areas.

Mahadiya, 13, next to the Camel Library.

Save the Children / Seifu Asseged

reaching children in rural areas. Staff report that virtual delivery of services is not always possible where girls in rural areas lack access to smart phones or even phone reception.

In Somalia, secondary education and support for victims and survivors of gender-based violence has been more challenging for girls from rural areas to access. For girls who have been married, Save the Children has set up technical vocational skills training programmes to enable them to develop their skills and tablets have also been provided for girls in urban schools to enable them to continue their education. In rural areas in Ethiopia, Save the Children had to delay some activities until schools reopened after lockdown.

Girls on the move: migrants, refugees and internally displaced girls

Migrant, refugee, and internally displaced girls are a diverse group whose journeys may begin in very different settings and take them through distinct experiences, with varying degrees of exposure to risk and opportunity.[95] The term "girls on the move" does however capture a range of potential shared experiences. These include:

- loss of citizenship-based legal protections
- economic hardship associated with lost livelihoods and new costs, despite potential for longer-term economic gain
- challenges accessing essential services, including education, whilst "on the move"
- risks associated with travelling without parents or caregivers, as well as increased self-reliance
- the mental health and psychosocial impacts of uncertainty, as well as separation from family and country of origin
- exposure to violence, particularly where movement is driven by conflict and other humanitarian crises.

The pandemic has impacted migrant, refugee, and forcibly displaced girls in a range of ways. Border closures have in some instances restricted movement, for example between countries. In other instances, containment measures have led to mass migration due to lost work opportunities and fear of infection, within countries and across borders. In India, an estimated 100 million people left cities of employment during early 2020,[96] while the pandemic sparked migration across the Mekong region and between humanitarian affected states like Venezuela, Afghanistan, and among Rohingya refugee populations.[97] Girls on the move may also be more likely to live in crowded areas more susceptible to the spread of COVID-19, including

refugee and internal displacement camps. They now face the prospect that barriers to accessing health services may extend to vaccines, with further implications for movement across borders.[98]

Qualitative research now provides evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on girls on the move in some settings. Save the Children and partners interviewed and conducted participatory workshops with adolescent girls in Al Karak and East Amman refugee camps in Jordan during 2020, as part of a study on child marriage in humanitarian crises.[99] Girls there reported that COVID-19 restrictions and the inability to earn income had delayed or prevented child marriages because wedding halls were closed, gatherings prohibited, and people could no longer afford wedding expenses. However, a significant number of girls reported that many adolescent girls in their communities still got engaged or married during COVID-19 lockdowns. They felt this was due to a range of factors including:

- already-engaged girls accelerating previous marriage plans during the lockdown period due to the decreased costs usually associated with wedding ceremonies
- jealousy of sisters or peers whose husbands treated them well during lockdown
- a desire to leave home because of increased housework or parents' rules and restrictions
- pressure from or forced marriages by parents who were unemployed or facing financial hardship caused by COVID-19
- feeling that, with schools closed and few opportunities for employment, girls have no better alternatives than child marriage.

Save the Children staff interviewed for this study report that girls in refugee camps in Lebanon, Ethiopia, and Somalia have been at higher risk of gender-based violence since the COVID-19 pandemic began. In Ethiopia, staff described an increase in the number of girls in refugee, migrant, or forcibly displaced populations who were pregnant or had given birth, many of whom had been deported from neighbouring countries or had returned from countries in the Middle East.

In recognition of the likely increased risks to girls and forcibly displaced populations, Save the Children's interventions in Somalia targeted girls from these at-risk groups from the onset of the pandemic. Internally displaced populations have been significantly affected, with a high number of cases due to a lack of information about COVID-19 precautions and a limited ability to social distance in overcrowded conditions. In Ethiopia, similar efforts are being made to ensure that inter-agency responses in refugee settings are gender-sensitive.

It is not always possible to separate the impacts of climate-related crises, conflict, and COVID-19 on girls on the move,

although in many instances the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing challenges. In Somalia for example, staff describe increased risk of gender-based violence to girls internally displaced by drought and conflict, as well as girl refugees from Syria and Yemen. Girls on the move living in congested and unhygienic camps or on the streets of Somalia are at risk of sexual violence, particularly without the protection of a secure household and in the context of inadequate support systems and minimal penalties against perpetrators. Girls in forced displacement camps in Somalia have reported to Save the Children that they do not feel safe since hearing about increasing cases of rape and murder of girls in the camps. In some cases, camp security staff have reportedly used their positions to abuse girls. Girls in refugee camps face difficulties reporting incidences of rape that they hear about.

CASE STUDY

RECOGNISING RISK AND SUPPORTING GIRLS' RIGHT TO SAFETY

In Lebanon, programme staff have used a scoring system to identify groups of girls who are from particular backgrounds which make them more vulnerable to early marriage than other girls. As part of a proactive response, the Office has worked with national committees and other actors to implement psycho-social support measures for girls as part of their programmes.

At a policy level, the National Roadmap to end Child Marriage and FGM/C by 2024 in Ethiopia has been rolled out by every regional state. Save the Children has worked with the Ethiopian government to specifically target girls in refugee settings and camps, and to sensitise stakeholders, provide resources, and advocate for this plan to be implemented.

Save the Children staff in Egypt report that prior to the pandemic, refugee girls, particularly those unaccompanied by carers, were excluded from or discriminated against in accessing available services. Provision of education to these groups has also been inadequate. Since COVID-19, however, efforts have been made to adapt laws and policies to include migrant and refugee girls, including to ensure they have access to the National Child Helpline where their cases will be handled in the same way as Egyptian girls.

Kulsum* is a 16-year-old Rohingya refugee who lives in a camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. "I want to be educated and do something that will make me feel empowered and independent," she says.

Sonali Chakma / Save the Children

4. What are governments doing to promote girls' rights through COVID-19 response and recovery?

Nearly two years since COVID-19 entered the global discourse, governments are continuing to grapple with changing conditions. Impacts of the crisis and responses to it have differed widely. Many countries have considered the opportunity to 'build back better' presented by the unprecedented impact of the pandemic. This section examines the steps governments have taken to-date through COVID-19 response plans, humanitarian response plans, and through the Generation Equality process (see the Child Marriage and COVID-19 Policy Snapshots in the annex for further analysis).

COVID-19 Response Plans

Almost all countries have now introduced some form of national COVID-19 response plan or measures. When the UN Secretary General called for a ceasefire on violence against women and girls in April 2020, he urged all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of national response plans and "put women's safety first.'"[100] In October 2020, UNDP and UN Women answered civil society calls for accountability with the release of their COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker.[101] With its most recent update,[102] the tracker included over 3,110 policy measures enacted by governments in 219 countries and territories, including over 800 measures by 148 countries to address violence against women.

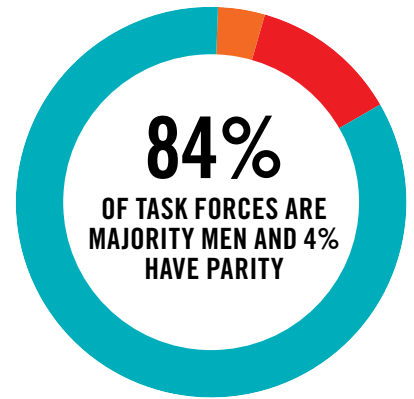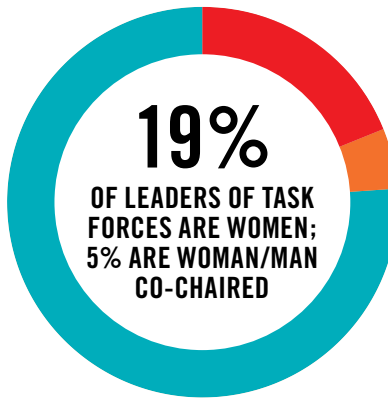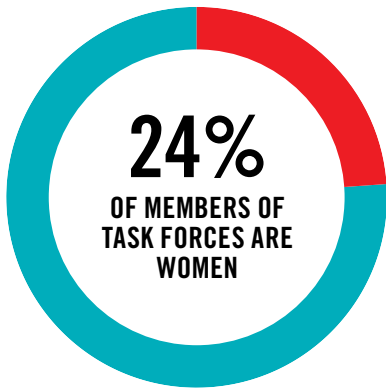UN Women and UNDP's analysis of country reporting on their own activities found that:

- 85% (or 219) of countries and territories surveyed registered at least one measure considered gender-sensitive in response to COVID-19 – a total of 3,122 measures.
- Two-thirds (64%) of measures to address violence concerned services, including helplines or reporting mechanisms and strengthening police and justice responses, where the next most common measure was awareness-raising (17%).
- Fewer countries classified as fragile, extremely fragile, or comparatively lower income introduced gender-sensitive policies or measures to address violence against women than non-fragile and comparatively middle- to higher-income countries.

The tracker is *not* age-disaggregated, a critical flaw given the age-specific discrimination girls experience and the tendency for adolescent girls in particular to fall through gaps between child protection and gender-based violence services designed for adults.[103] A preliminary analysis by Save the Children shows that girls are specifically referenced or addressed by 42 of the 247 countries and territories featured in the policy analysis.[104] However, many measures refer to the experiences of "women *and girls*" together, signalling that the policy responses in place may not be responsive to girls' unique needs. Six of the measures that specifically mention girls (from Chile, Mexico, South Africa, and Uganda) were categorised as relating to social protection. One was tied to labour markets, and all others featured aims to address violence.

Examples of COVID-19 responses including girl-specific measures include:

- New remote referral hotlines, continuation of family court hearings despite suspension of other court hearings, and measures to continue and adapt efforts to end harmful practices, specifically FGM/C, through the pandemic in Egypt.
- Girls' empowerment programming for economic and social protection through "Girls Empowering Girls", an urban cash transfer and mentoring programme for adolescent girls that has adapted to allow remote enrolment, delivery, and mentoring in Uganda.
- Measures to reduce harmful practices including child marriage and FGM in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Kenya.

The latest update to the tracker (March 2021) introduced a women's leadership indicator. The tracker uses the representation of women within COVID-19 taskforces (defined as any executive branch institution created by a government in response to COVID-19, meaning that one country may have multiple bodies classified as COVID-19 taskforces) and their leadership.[105] Analysis shows that of the 225 task forces with sex-disaggregated data on membership, women made up only 24% of members, and 12% of taskforces contained no women at all. Women in taskforce leadership were even rarer. Sex-disaggregated leadership data was available on 334 COVID-19 task forces in 179 countries, just 19% of which were led by women and 4.4% had achieved gender parity in leadership. A clear majority (84%) of task force leadership is dominated by men.

24%
OF MEMBERS OF
TASK FORCES ARE
WOMEN

19%
OF LEADERS OF TASK
FORCES ARE WOMEN;
5% ARE WOMAN/MAN
CO-CHAIRED

84%
OF TASK FORCES ARE
MAJORITY MEN AND 4%
HAVE PARITY

The leadership measure offers a valuable opportunity to examine girls' access to decision-making in COVID-19 response development and recovery. However, this measure, like the remainder of the database, is not disaggregated by age. Analysis to-date does not identify any taskforce engagement with adolescent girls. While girls' engagement in COVID-19 taskforces would promote their right to participate in decision-making spaces and realisation of the calls to "build back better,", task force membership is an indicator that is unlikely to capture less formal engagement with girls, such as Mexican authorities' engagement with adolescent network RedPazMx, which works to promote children's rights through peace. RedPazMx has been working to raise girls' voices with policy-makers as part of the COVID-19 response since the pandemic began.[106]

Authors of the latest analysis note that given the low rates of women's participation in COVID-19 governance, it is not surprising that the UNDP/UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker has found that only 42 out of 219 countries and territories (19%) have a holistic gender-sensitive policy response, addressing women's economic security, unpaid care work, and violence against women and girls. Lack of engagement with girls in COVID taskforces and other planning has also likely limited the ability of responses to address girls' needs and preferences.

The COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response

The initial COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) placed far less emphasis on gender-based violence and other child protection related concerns in early drafts, delaying critically needed funding and life-saving services for children.

As per updated Financial Tracking Service (FTS) data, although requested funds for gender-based violence under the GHRP were eventually nearly met (97% met, compared with only 32.5% of child protection funding needs met),[107] the funding requested is still low compared to extreme need, particularly in comparison to overall funding requested. This reflects ongoing concerns with

how an under-prioritisation of protection concerns, coupled with a failure to adequately consult with adolescent girls in the development of humanitarian needs assessments and response plans, leads to a failure to adequately request funding commensurate with needs. A recent study from UN Women and UNFPA found that not only is the amount of funding targeting the needs of girls and women disproportionately underfunded, the amount of funding requested in humanitarian appeals is significantly low.[108]

The eventual funding of gender-based violence needs under the GHRP followed more than six months of consistent and vocal advocacy from the gender equality and gender-based violence community, including a community letter signed by nearly 600 organisations, donors, and governments.[109]

Significantly, the underfunding of both child protection and gender-based violence prevention and response was also notable in relation to data on funding reported for country specific humanitarian responses in 2020 – with child protection comprising less than 0.58% of funds reported and gender-based violence making up 0.5%.[110]

For context, by November 2020, 27 of 32 operations in humanitarian settings reported an increase in gender-based violence and 89% of responses described the gender-based violence risk as severe or extreme. Twenty-five out of 28 operations also reported an increase in violence against children more broadly and 100% of operations described psychological distress and growing mental health needs of affected populations.[111] The same report emphasised that ten of the 15 countries with the world's highest rate of child, early, and forced marriage remain home to an active Protection Cluster, and over 60% of cluster operations rated the risk of child marriage as significant or major.

The GHRP's final progress report heavily focused on gender-based violence as one of the most troubling secondary effects of the health crisis. The report highlighted some progress, including that, of the 48 GHRP countries which reported, 81% were able to maintain or expand gender-based violence services in response to COVID-19.

Following consistent pressure from civil society and donor champions in 2020, the Global Humanitarian Overview for 2021 (GHO) included explicit recognition of the impact of the pandemic on adolescent girls' protection needs, including gender-based violence risks and response needs, and noted the need for increased financial support for child protection and gender-based violence services. However, continued protracted and intersecting crisis have led to continued funding shortages, particularly related to protection needs. At the end of August, countries under the 2021 GHO have received just a third of the total humanitarian funding required for 2021. Several sectors critical to children's rights, particularly for adolescent girls—health, education, and protection—are severely underfunded, with more than 85% of needs unmet.[112] A mere 11% of necessary funds for protection programmes for gender-based violence have been received in spite of the fact that the pandemic's impact on gender-based violence have been increasingly documented and reflected within.[113]

Generation Equality and Commitments to the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality

2020 was supposed to be a once-in-a-generation opportunity for women and girls, marking 25 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted and unanimously endorsed by the UN General Assembly. The Beijing Platform for Action set out a blueprint for achieving gender equality and was the first global instrument to recognise the challenges and rights abuses faced by "the girl child," as well as her unique potential to drive positive change and promote gender equality and peace into the future. The anniversary was to be marked by the new Generation Equality process, including two global forums aimed at driving momentum to accelerate lagging progress for gender equality over the next five years. COVID-19 postponed the forums and delayed the process, introducing a new and too often competing priority for attention and investment.

As recognition that an end to the pandemic and return to primarily in-person international events remained a long way off, progress for Generation Equality picked up in late 2020 with the announcement of the leadership of the multi-sectoral Action Coalitions on six key themes (Gender based violence, Economic Justice and Rights, Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Feminist Action for Climate Justice, Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality and Feminist Movements and Leadership). The postponed forums were held in 2021 and a Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality was launched at the final Forum in Paris in July 2021, establishing agreed actions with ambitious targets endorsed by

Action Coalitions and supported by government, civil society, UN and private sector commitment-makers.

The Global Acceleration Plan includes actions specifically to address violence against adolescent girls and specific targets for reducing child marriage and FGM/C by 2026. Whether Generation Equality delivers for girls' rights will depend heavily on the commitments made in support of these plans. A review of commitments published on the Generation Equality commitment tracker shows that just under half of the approximately 274 commitments made to address gender-based violence refer to "girls" or "young people/women". With limited detail published so far, these sorts of measures are among the best we have but tell us very little about actual impacts. Girls are often included under the label "women and girls" with little attention to their different needs or how resources are divided across age-groups. Alternately, measures designed for women also benefit girls who experience many of the same acts of violence and discrimination. Publishing all commitments in full detail on a single platform will be an important first step. To date, the commitment-tracker has only been made available through registration for the Paris Forum and was no longer available online at the time of writing. Understanding and ensuring impact for adolescent girls will ultimately depend on accountability processes setting targets and measuring progress specifically for adolescent girls.

Some clear and critical commitments to girls were announced during the Paris Forum. These include flagship joint commitments from governments, civil society, and private sector leaders to reduce child marriage and FGM/C, and to deliver and improve access to comprehensive sexuality education, as well as commitments to girls' education.[114] The Governments of Burkina Faso, Benin, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Togo have made a cross-country commitment including action to change laws and social norms to end child marriage and FGM/C.[115] Of ten financial commitments to build feminist movements, just three include financial contributions to girls' networks, including a commitment from Save the Children. Importantly, the Malala Fund has also pledged $20 million to support girls' education advocates.[116]

Asia, age 17, campaigns for children's rights and ending violence against children in Tanzania.

Secilia Bosco / Save the Children

5. Recommendations

One year after Save the Children published grave projections on the impact of COVID-19, data on the effects of the crisis on girls remains scarce and desperately needed to inform evidence-based responses. Emerging qualitative evidence, however, supports widely held fears that the pandemic is exacerbating existing gender and other inequalities with girls' futures in the balance. As countries and the international community continue to respond to the shifting demands of the pandemic and look to "build forward better", while also meeting increased needs and rights violations resulting from protracted conflicts and climate change-related disasters, Save the Children makes the following recommendations to national governments, UN actors, humanitarian actors, donors, and civil society.

National Governments

National governments should meet their obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil girls' rights. They must serve as primary duty bearers to implement policy and action to support girls negatively impacted by COVID-19, conflict, and climate change-related disasters in line with needs identified, and lead national agendas and campaigns to support girls' rights. They should:

1. **Institutionalise adolescent girls' safe and meaningful participation in policy-making and accountability processes** through the establishment, resourcing, and implementation of local- and national-level laws, policies, and guidelines recognising adolescent girls' agency and rights as key stakeholders in their own lives by:

   a. **Ensuring the Nine Basic Requirements for meaningful child participation** set out under the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No 12 are in place.[117]

   b. **Dedicating sustained and flexible financial and technical resources** to support adolescent girls' civic knowledge, skills, and capacity;[118] exposing girls to spaces and mentors to cultivate their leadership potential; and creating pathways for leadership.

   c. **Identifying and addressing gender-related barriers to adolescent girls' safe and meaningful participation in decision-making** through targeted strategies, and address other structural barriers adolescent girls may experience in all their diversity.[119]

Eloge (15), a member of the Youth Council, in Kinshasha wears a facemask. Before activities were closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, she spent her time between school and youth council activities.

2. **Put the rights of girls in all their diversity at the centre of COVID-19 response and ongoing humanitarian and development policy, planning, and programming by:**

   a. **Conducting and applying an intersectional gender and power analysis** to inform evidence-based and inclusive policy and programme responses.[120]

   b. **Increasing and improving safe and ethical data collection, analysis, and reporting.** All data should be disaggregated by age-group and sex at a minimum and, where safe and possible, by disability, ethnicity, geography, wealth, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression.

   c. **Committing to gender-responsive, inclusive, and child-sensitive budgeting** and other best practices for fair financing for girls.

3. **Address critical barriers to girls' rights and gender equality,** including preventing and responding to child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence and violence against children by:

   a. **Recognising gender-based violence, child protection, mental health and psychosocial support, and sexual and reproductive health services and information as essential services**, including social service providers, shelters, and adolescent girl-friendly safe spaces, which must be maintained and adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and future public health crises.[121] These services must be fully and sustainably resourced, including with personal protective equipment and training to operate safely. They must also be accessible to all girls, regardless of legal, immigration, or refugee status.

   b. **Developing and strengthening formal and informal protection systems** through engagement of local women's, girls', and children's rights groups; of religious, traditional, and community leaders; and of representative organisations of persons with disabilities; including within humanitarian, refugee, and forced displacement settings.

   c. **Working with communities,** including girls, their parents and caregivers, their extended families, men and boys, and traditional and religious leaders to challenge harmful gender norms and build support to end child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence.

   d. **Ending child marriage and supporting already married girls to realise their rights** by passing laws against gender-based violence, including harmful practices; setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 years without exception; and repealing laws and policies that create barriers to girls accessing their rights to education and sexual and reproductive health

Three years ago, 12-year-old Dana* and her family fled their home in Syria due to conflict. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges. "We forgot all the pain and suffering that we had been through, but corona came and re-opened our old injuries," she says.

Idris Hussain/Save the Children

services and information. These measures should form part of fully funded and implemented multisectoral national action plans with accountability mechanisms.[122]

   e. **Promoting the realisation of girls' right to education** by supporting Save the Children's 8 Point Plan to Build Forward Better.[123]

   f. **Joining the Generation Equality movement to drive critical progress for girls' rights through effective delivery of the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality by making a concrete and fully-resourced commitment** in support of an action in furtherance of girls' rights under the Acceleration Plan and setting an age-disaggregated target and indicator.

   g. **Promoting accountability to girls under the Generation Equality Accountability Framework,** including through requirements to report on progress for adolescent girls using age-disaggregated targets and indicators.

   h. **Supporting the Generation Equality Adolescent Girls' Advisory Group** including through technical and financial support, amplification and uptake of their recommendations, and through facilitating the opportunity for girls in their country to connect with the group and participate in national-level accountability processes.

UN Actors

UN actors, including UN agencies, should:

1. **Systematically include adolescent girls' safe and meaningful participation in international policy-making and accountability processes** that affect them, including Generation Equality, the Commission on the Status of Women, the High-Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals with a particular focus on Goal 5, the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, and Human Rights accountability mechanisms such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Universal Periodic Reviews, and reporting on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). UN actors should ensure adolescent girl-friendly and girl-specific platforms are available for them to safely engage with decision-makers in a meaningful, ongoing fashion.

2. **Maintain, update, and expand the COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker** to promote ongoing accountability for girls' rights and addressing gender inequality through national pandemic response and recovery plans, including through additional age-disaggregated data wherever possible.

3. **Work to ensure the Generation Equality Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality delivers for girls by:**

   a. Including age-disaggregated performance indicators in the Generation Equality Accountability Framework.

   b. Establishing a clear and meaningful mandate for the Adolescent Girls' Advisory Group and providing financial and technical support, including standing staff capacity to support the Advisory Group to operate effectively.

Donors

Donors, including governments, UN Actors, foundations, and private sector champions for gender equality should:

1. **Provide financial support for feminist leadership** through flexible funding for grassroots women's and girls' rights organisations, and girl-led networks and groups, including representative organisations of women and girls with disabilities.

2. **Mandate that an intersectional gender and power analysis informs the development of all requests for proposals** for COVID-19 response and recovery efforts and beyond. All proposed projects should be gender-sensitive at a minimum.

3. **Deliver technical expertise and financial assistance to support development of national policies and programmes** for girls, including girls' participation, accountability mechanisms, gender-and child-responsive budgeting, and safe and ethical data collection, analysis, and use in all settings.

4. **Make financial commitments to girl-focussed actions under the Generation Equality Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality,** including to support girls' effective participation in the process and accountability mechanisms like the Adolescent Girls' Advisory Group.

Humanitarian Actors

Humanitarian actors including UN Agencies, governments, donors, and civil society organisations should:

1. **Ensure that all humanitarian needs assessments and humanitarian response plans are informed by a rapid intersectional gender and power analysis** and the safe and ethical collection and analysis of sex-, age-, and diversity-disaggregated data. Humanitarian needs assessments and humanitarian response plans must ensure that the needs of adolescent girls are identified and addressed.

2. **Increase humanitarian funding for gender-responsive child protection services and gender-based violence prevention, mitigation, and response efforts,** commensurate with urgent need and chronic underfunding within humanitarian response.

3. **Use existing evidence-based guidelines in COVID-19 response efforts and other humanitarian crises,** including the Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming;[124] Inter-Agency Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action;[125] Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action;[126] Minimum Standards for Education Preparedness, Response and Recovery (INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies);[127] and Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Toolkit for Humanitarian Settings.[128] Gender-based violence prevention and risk mitigation and the promotion of gender equality throughout humanitarian response are the duty of all humanitarian actors at all times, as per the IASC Gender Equality Policy and Accountability Framework.[129]

4. **Ensure the continued commitment and implementation of a principled humanitarian response,** including the safe and unrestricted participation of female humanitarian staff in needs assessments, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all humanitarian services at every level. Without the full participation of female staff, humanitarian assistance

will not be delivered in a manner that upholds core humanitarian principles and standards and will be ineffective in addressing the needs of girls.

Civil Society Organisations

Civil society organisations (CSOs) including international non-governmental organisations, grassroots women's rights organisations, feminist networks, girl-led groups and networks, and child-led community-based organisations should:

1. **Consult with girls during internal decision-making processes.** Girls should be stakeholders for internal strategic or oversight processes, for example, through their participation on advisory boards or through engagement in strategic planning.

2. **Develop or adapt programming to increase adolescent girls' participation, using an intersectional gender and power analysis.** CSOs should identify, co-create or adapt, and directly support initiatives that would increase adolescent girls' abilities to participate in decision-making processes. Examples of programming elements include advocacy and research skills, civic and political knowledge, leadership opportunities, intergenerational mentorship opportunities, data and media literacy, or any other initiatives identified by the girls themselves. CSOs should work across contexts, supporting girls in development, humanitarian, forced displacement, and nexus contexts, and ensuring the inclusion of girls most affected by inequality and discrimination, including indigenous girls, girls with disabilities, girls from the LBTQIA+ community, married girls, pregnant girls and child mothers, and girls living on streets, in extreme poverty, or otherwise hard to reach, for example, due to migration and forced displacement.

3. **Demand accountability to girls** by maintaining pressure on governments, UN agencies, and humanitarian actors to report on and be accountable for the impact of COVID-19 response planning and policy, as well as future development and humanitarian planning and policy, by:

   a. Facilitating adults to partner with girls to call for the institutionalisation of mechanisms for accountability to girls.

   b. Supporting girls and their networks to participate in and connect with accountability mechanisms like the Generation Equality Adolescent Girls' Advisory Group, as well as local and national accountability processes.

Young girls, in transit from the Northern Triangle countries without their families, receive support from safe spaces programming. During the pandemic, child protection programming has been disrupted or underfunded even as needs increase.

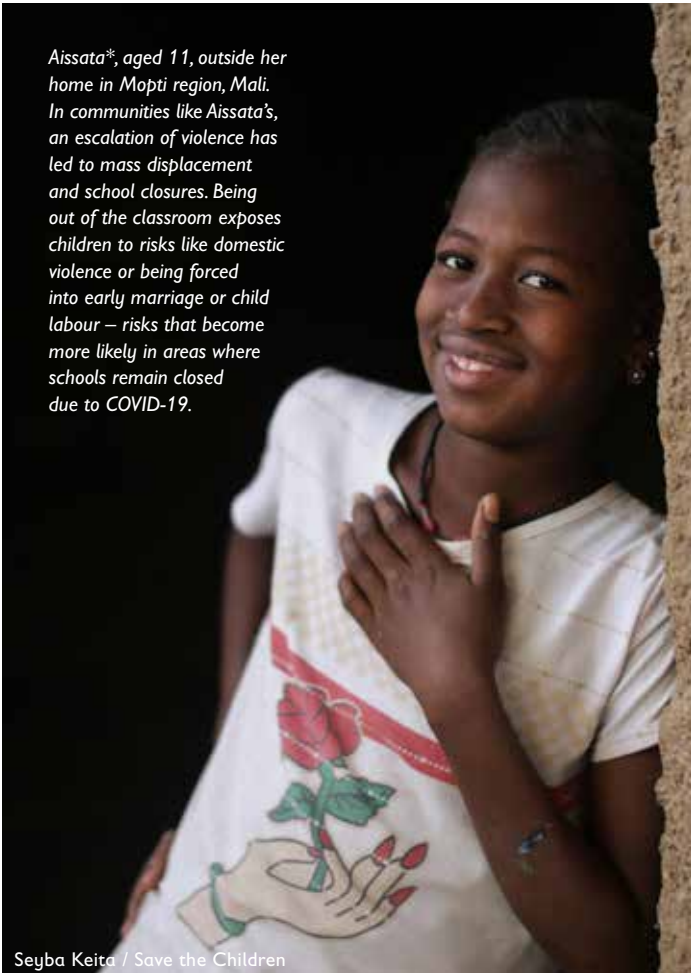Caroline Trutmann Marconi / Save the Children

6. Annex: Child Marriage and COVID-19 Vulnerability—Policy Snapshots

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities and provided a clear reminder of the importance of robust human rights protections and resilient health, education, child protection, gender-based violence, and social protection systems to manage and recover from crises. Child marriage is a grave breach of girls' rights. The multisectoral drivers and consequences of child marriage also make it a valuable indicator of gender inequality and girls' access to other rights, including their right to education, safety from violence, and to the highest attainable standard of sexual and reproductive health.[130] Ending child marriage requires a holistic response in which girls' rights across all sectors are guaranteed, an approach reflected in governments' growing commitment to introduce multisectoral national action plans to end child marriage, particularly as part of the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage.[131] Given that increases in child marriage as a result of COVID-19's impacts are widely predicted but nationally representative data on the number of child marriages since the pandemic are not yet available, the following "snapshots" present alternative data indicative of the risk of increasing child marriage, as well as key policy measures in place to end the practice and protect against the worst predictions. These snapshots, developed for twelve countries, cover:

- **National rate of child marriage before COVID-10:** Percentage of 20-24 year-old women married before age 18.

- **Child marriage laws and policy:**
  - Whether the country has laws that set the minimum age of marriage at 18 years without exception.
  - Whether the country has a national action plan to end child marriage.

- **Access to sexual and reproductive health services and information and rights, and risk of adolescent pregnancy:**
  - Whether the country has an enabling law on sexuality education curriculum.[132]
  - Whether the legal framework protects the right of pregnant and parenting girls to education.[133]

- **Risks to girls' education since COVID-19:** The country's ranking in Save the Children's Risks to Education Index for girls.[134] This index covers six dimensions: climate change, humanitarian (attacks on schools and internally displaced

children), youth unemployment, learning (harmonised test scores and school-age digital connectivity), out-of-school rates at the primary level, and vaccines (COVID-19 vaccination rate and prioritisation of teachers for vaccination). Rankings are disaggregated by sex.

- **Government steps to protect girls' rights since COVID-19:**
  - If COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence.[135]
  - Whether the country has pledged national commitments to the Generation Equality movement and delivering the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality 2021-26.[136]

Aissata*, aged 11, outside her home in Mopti region, Mali. In communities like Aissata's, an escalation of violence has led to mass displacement and school closures. Being out of the classroom exposes children to risks like domestic violence or being forced into early marriage or child labour – risks that become more likely in areas where schools remain closed due to COVID-19.

Seyba Keita / Save the Children

Bolivia

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N[137]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: N

Sexuality education curricula laws: Y[138]

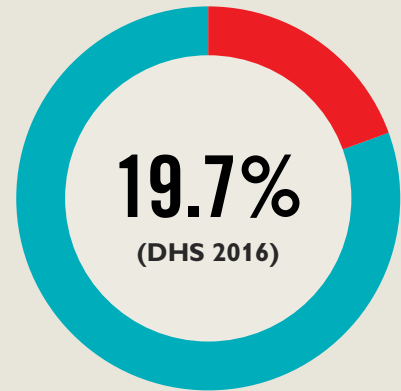Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: Y

Risk to girls' education index rating: Moderate risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y
Refers to children or girls: N

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls:
No commitments made to-date.

The German Government has committed financing to local non-government and civil society organisations in Bolivia as part of a project granting 10-70,000 Euros to support prevention for the elimination of GBV, services for survivors of GBV and women's rights organisations. The Bolivian Government can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

19.7%
(DHS 2016)

National rate of child marriage
The rate is higher among girls living in rural areas at 33.5% comparted to 15.6% among girls in urban areas

Burkina Faso

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N[139]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y[140]

Sexuality education curricula laws: Y

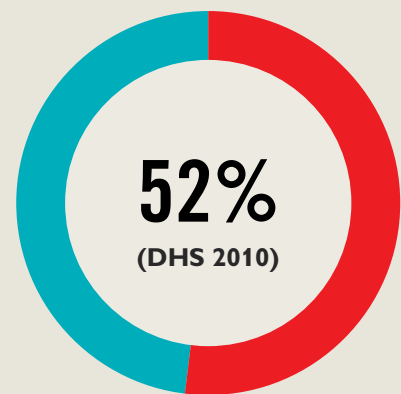Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected?: N

Risk to girls' education index rating: High Risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y. Refers to children or girls: Y

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: Yes.

Burkina Faso is a leader of the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. It has made a joint commitment with the Action Coalition and the Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence to drive progress toward preventing 9 million child marriages by 2026. The Government has also made commitments as part of a joint commitment with Togo and other countries under which it will:

- Integrate family life education for girls into secondary education, safe spaces, centres and vocational schools by 2030
- Make quality sexual and reproductive health services available to adolescents and youth by 2026

52%
(DHS 2010)

National rate of child marriage
Data from Burkina Faso is now more than ten years old and urgently needs updating

Côte d'Ivoire

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: Y[141]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y
Note: Implementation has been limited.[142]
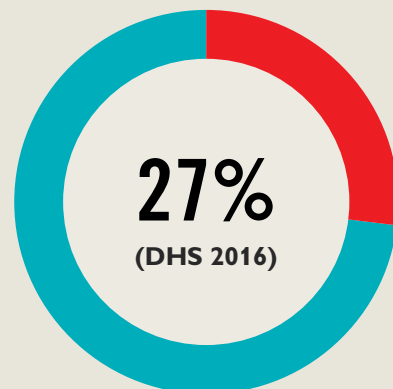
Sexuality education curricula laws: N

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected?: N

Risk to girls' education index rating: Moderate.

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y. Refers to children or girls: Y

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: No commitments made to-date.

The German Government has committed financing to local non-government and civil society organisations in Côte d'Ivoire as part of a project granting 10-70,000 Euros to support prevention for the elimination of GBV, services for survivors of GBV and women's rights organisations. The Government of Côte d'Ivoire can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

27%
(DHS 2016)

National rate of child marriage

The rate among girls living in rural areas is much higher at 43.0% compared to 15.9% among girls in urban areas.

Dominican Republic

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: Y[143]

Addressing high rates of informal unions not covered by the new law remains a priority.[144]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y[145]

Sexuality education curricula laws: N

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: No data.

Risk to girls' education index rating: Reduced

Note this rating is from an older version of Save the Children's Vulnerability Index published in 2020, different indicators are used in the 2021 publication.[146]

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y. Refers to children or girls: N

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: No commitments made to-date.

The Government of Cote D'Ivoire can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

35.9%
(MICS 2014)
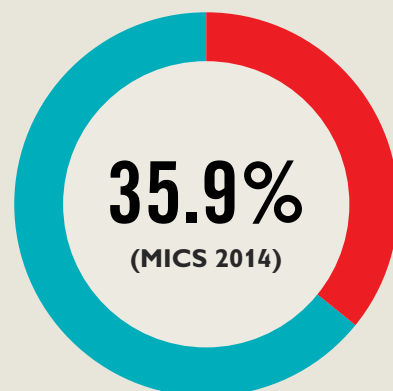
National rate of child marriage

The rate among girls living in rural areas is higher at 47.7% compared to 32.6% among girls in urban areas.

Egypt

Law sets the age of child marriage at **18** without exception: N[147]

The current law sets the minimum age for registration of a marriage at **18** years but does not set a legal minimum age for marriage – leaving a loophole for unregistered child marriages. Under this exception families can wait until a girl turns **18** to register a marriage that occurred while she was a child.[148]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y. Note: Implementation has been limited.[149]

Sexuality education curricula laws: N

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: N

Risk to girls' education index rating: High Risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y. Refers to children or girls: Y

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: No commitments made to-date.

The German Government has committed financing to local non-government and civil society organisations in Egypt as part of a project granting 10-70,000 Euros to support prevention for the elimination of GBV, services for survivors of GBV and women's rights organisations. The Government of Egypt can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

17.4%
(DHS 2014)
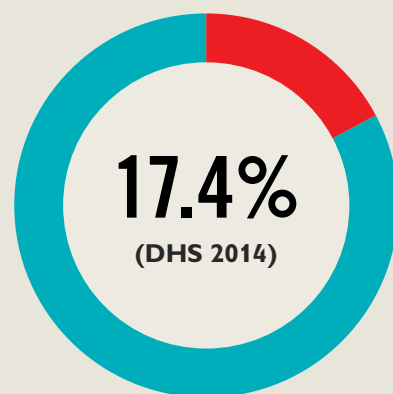
National rate of child marriage
The rate is much higher among girls living in rural areas at 22% compared to 8.9% among girls in urban areas.

Ethiopia

Law sets the age of child marriage at **18** without exception: N. Existing law allows marriage at the age of **16** with judicial consent.[150]

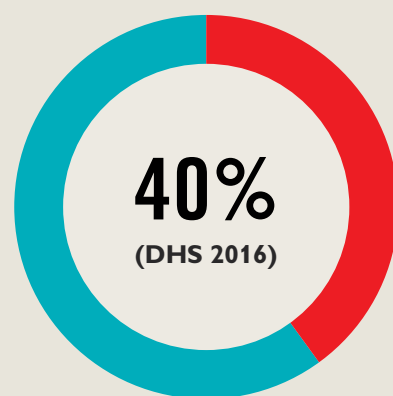National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y[151]

Sexuality education curricula laws: Y

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: N

Risk to girls' education index rating: High risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y. Refers to children or girls: Y

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: No commitment to-date. The Canadian Government will fund a project valued at $9.2 million CAD with the Parliamentary Centre to support legislatures in Ghana, Ethiopia and Togo to be more inclusive, gender responsive and transparent. The Government of Ethiopia can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

40%
(DHS 2016)

National rate of child marriage

Indonesia

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N
Parents can request dispensations from religious and district courts to allow marriages below 18 years.[152]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y[154]

Sexuality education curricula laws: Y. The Education Law 2013 requires that a Health Reproductive Curriculum be taught from primary school with an increasing focus through secondary school extending to subjects covering menstruation and contraception.
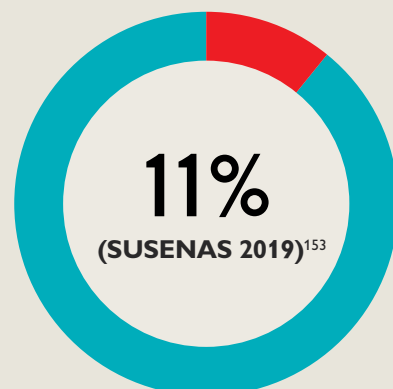
Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: N

Risk to girls' education index rating: No data

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y. Refers to children or girls: Y

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: None to-date.

The Government of Indonesia can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

11%
(SUSENAS 2019)[153]

National rate of child marriage

Lebanon

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N[155]

Rates of child marriage are higher among refugees living in Lebanon: 40.5% among Syrian refugees, 25% among Palestinian Refugees from Syria and 12% among Palestinian Refugees from Lebanon.[157]
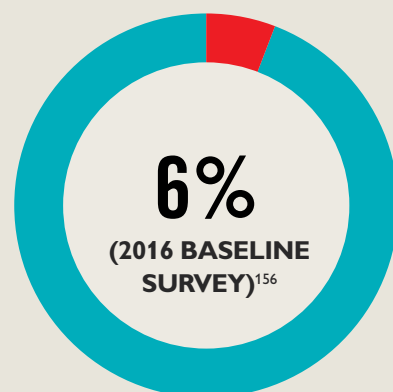
National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: N[158]

Sexuality education curricula laws: No data.

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: N

Risk to girls' education index rating: Moderate risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y
Refers to children or girls: N (only refers to children of survivors of violence).

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: No commitment to-date. The Canadian Government has committed to a new regional project including Lebanon focussed on disadvantaged women and those particularly affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will to promote the economic and political participation of women in the region, and use innovative approaches to target young women with career guidance and on management of harassment in the workplace. The Government of Lebanon can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

6%
(2016 BASELINE SURVEY)[156]

National rate of child marriage

Mali

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N[159]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: N. A process to draft a national strategy is currently underway.[160]
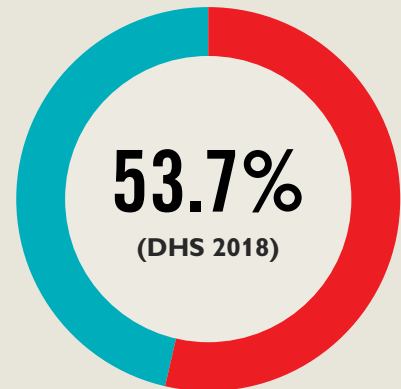
Sexuality education curricula laws: N

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: N

Risk to girls' education index rating: Extreme risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: No data.

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: No commitment to-date. Germany will financially support a project of the Mukwege Foundation in Mali to strengthen participation and advocacy for reparations and other forms of redress for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, including through support to local networks. The four-country project will provide $118,000 in funding. The Government of Mali can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

53.7%
(DHS 2018)

National rate of child marriage

The rate is higher among girls living in rural areas at 61.7% compared to 33.7% among girls in urban areas.

Niger

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N[161]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y[162]

Sexuality education curricula laws: No data.

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: N
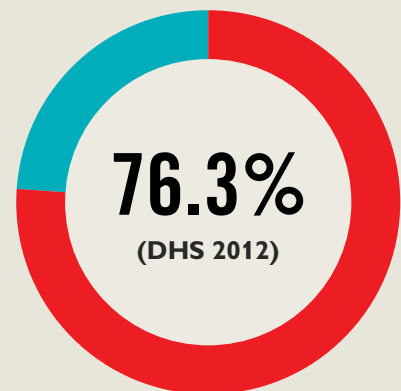
Risk to girls' education index rating: High risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y
Refers to children or girls: N

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: No commitments to-date.

Germany has committed $10 million to a new bilateral project in Niger 'Promoting Girls Education' (2022-2025) to improve the educational attainment of at least 10,000 girls, prevent child marriage and adolescent pregnancy and facilitate the entry of girls into the labour market. The Government of Niger can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

76.3%
(DHS 2012)

National rate of child marriage

The rate is even higher among girls in rural areas at compared to 43.5% among girls in urban areas. Data from Niger is however now almost 10 years old and urgently needs updating.

Nigeria

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N

Inconsistencies remain between existing national and sub-national laws.[163]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y[164]

Sexuality education curricula laws: No data.

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: No data

Risk to girls' education index rating: Extreme risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y
Refers to children or girls: N

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: Yes. The Government of Niger has made a number of important commitments to address gender-based violence, including child marriage:

- $500,000 to end child marriage.
- Ratifying and implement the ILO Convention 190 on eliminating Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the world of work by 2026 in close partnership with relevant agencies and the private sector.
- nationwide domestication and implementation of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015) and Child Rights Act (2003) by advocating for the remaining 14 and 10 states yet to domesticate the Acts to pass it into law.
- Federal investment in ending GBV through the federal government of Nigeria including establishment of one-stop centres and scaling up of GBV research and capacity building to improve evidence-based programming, establishment of GBV and family courts and enhanced data collection building on the Join EU-UN Spotlight Initiative.

43.4%
(DHS 2018)
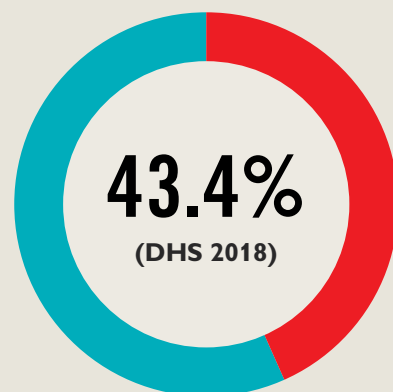
National rate of child marriage

The rate is higher among girls living in rural areas at 58.4% compared to 23.3% among girls in urban areas. Inequalities are even more stark between the richest and poorest girls with child marriage at 10% for girls growing up in the wealthiest households compared to 76.3% among the poorest.

Sierra Leone

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N
The country has conflicting laws.[165]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: Y[166]

Sexuality education curricula laws: N

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: Bans on pregnant girls attending school were lifted in 2019.[167]

Risk to girls' education index rating: High risk

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: Y
Refers to children or girls: Y

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls: No commitments to-date.

The Government of Sierra Leone can still make commitments to help deliver the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality here.

29.6%
(DHS 2019)
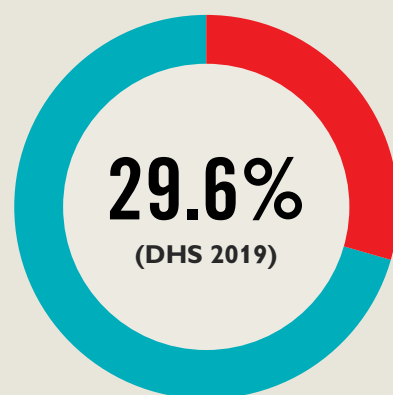
National rate of child marriage

Rates are higher among girls living in rural areas at 41.8% compared to 18.6% among girls in urban areas

Somalia

Law sets the age of child marriage at 18 without exception: N
The country has conflicting laws.[168]

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage: N[169]

Sexuality education curricula laws: No data.

Right to education of pregnant and parenting girls legally protected: N

Risk to girls' education index rating: Extreme risk.

COVID-19 response plans address gender-based violence: No data

Generation Equality Forum commitments to support progress for girls:
The Government of Somalia has committed:

- $200,000 to support advocacy initiatives to prevent sexual and gender-based violence.
- to enhance the capacity of the justice, education, health and social sectors, Ministries and agencies on GBV case management, including by mainstreaming GBV prevention and response within action plans.
- to support the establishment of five regional GBV stop centres and safe houses.
- implementation of the Gender Based Violence Action Plan 2015 including strengthening partnerships with development partners, civil society organisations, religious and traditional/cultural institutions and the private sector on prevention and response to gender based violence
- strengthen partnerships and collaboration with civil society, the private sector and affected communities to build stronger and resilient communities to promote and protect the full rights of women and girls.

36%
(DHS 2020)
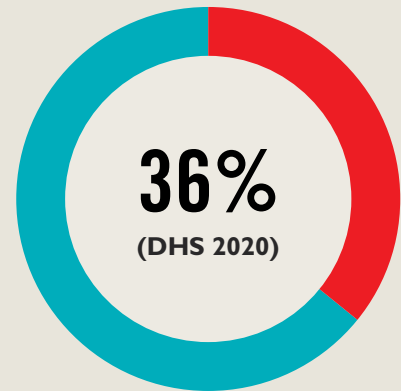
National rate of child marriage

Endnotes

1 UN Women (2020) COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.

2 UN Women (2020) COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.

3 International Energy Agency (2020) Global Energy Review 2020: The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on global energy demand and CO2 emissions; World Health Organization (2021) WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard With Vaccination Data.

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Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. Around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. When crisis strikes, and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach. We do whatever it takes for children—every day and in times of crisis—transforming their lives and the future we share.

ON THE COVER
"Children's voices are not heard by elders and even society don't bother about us. They decide about our future without asking us. I hope that it will be a long time before I'm made to go and live with my husband," 13-year-old Preeti* says.

Photo: Laura Bailey / Save the Children